

Cultivating Gender Equality to Achieve Educational and Social Sustainability among Indigenous Women of Malaysia

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Abstract

The ultimate aim of sustainability is to meet present-day requirements without endangering those of future generations. Gender equality is essential for social and educational sustainability because it allows people and society to reach their full potential, which produces more inclusive, equitable, and profitable results. This study depicts certain cases of the indigenous women in Malaysia, exploring the gender equality aspects in achieving educational and social sustainability in the indigenous peoples. A qualitative case study approach was employed for this case study. A semi-structured interview was conducted with 10 indigenous women from two main tribes, which are the Mah Meri and Temiar. Data were transcribed and analysed using a thematic analysis process. The findings reveal that there were three major themes generated from the thematic analysis, which are contributions to society and freedom in the pursuit of education. This case study highlights that indigenous women play a vital role in creating a balance between the responsibilities of the genders in order to achieve SDG5 (gender equality) and educational sustainability in indigenous communities.

Keywords: Gender equality, sustainable education, social sustainability, indigenous

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were created by the international community, specifically through the United Nations, as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This article pertains to the objectives of SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 4 (Quality Education). Gender equality is essential for achieving social and educational sustainability among the Indigenous communities in Malaysia. Sustainable development includes terms like climate change, governance, indigenous organisation, land, perspectives, adaptation, conflict, and more, and this seems to be the most significant theme in research examining how indigenous populations contribute to the SDGs (Bansal et al. 2024). Gender equality refers to the belief that all individuals, men and women, boys and girls, have equal access to opportunities, resources, and treatment in order to realise their potential, preserve their human rights and dignity, and participate in and benefit from political, social, cultural, and economic advancement, according to Guthridge et al. (2022). The ability of a society to preserve and grow social cohesiveness, equity, and well-being across time is known as social sustainability. In recent years, social sustainability as a crucial component of sustainability has come to be recognised more and more. Its main goals are improving life quality and attaining human well-being (Wang & Kee, 2024). A socially sustainable society ensures that no one is left behind, particularly vulnerable groups like Indigenous women, who often face multiple layers of discrimination based on both gender and ethnicity. The term sustainable education describes the dissemination of information that guarantees a balanced national development that takes into account human needs as well as social and economic advancement (Alam, 2023). It equips individuals with the knowledge and skills to improve their lives and communities, encourages critical thinking, civic engagement, and environmental awareness and supports lifelong learning and personal development. Ambitious goals are necessary to encourage creative research on complex systems and to expand and intensify the discussion well beyond the academic community, as stated in the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4) on "quality education" (WEF, 2016). The underrepresentation of women in science fields, especially within academia, is also a persistent global issue with complex, systemic roots. Papadakis et al. (2018) found that the underrepresentation of women in science fields, particularly in the academic area, is a problem that exists in various countries. As Indigenous peoples, they face structural disadvantages, including poverty, geographic isolation, and limited access to public services. For Indigenous women, these challenges are compounded by traditional gender roles and systemic discrimination, leading to lower school enrolment, early marriage, and restricted participation in social and economic life. According to UNESCO (2022), the report stated particularly within the

context of SDG 4.5, which focuses on equity and inclusion in education. In this report, consistently highlight the need to ensure indigenous peoples and linguistic and cultural minorities have access to quality education and are included in educational systems.

In Malaysia, Indigenous women often have limited access to formal education, healthcare, economic resources and political representation. In education, they have limited access to schools in remote areas, early marriage or domestic responsibilities that disrupt girls' education, a lack of culturally appropriate curriculum or Indigenous language support and very few female role models or Indigenous women teachers. Promoting gender equality ensures that Indigenous women have equal opportunities to access and complete their education, which is critical for breaking cycles of poverty and marginalisation. Educated women are more likely to contribute to community leadership, advocate for Indigenous rights, and improve the well-being of future generations. Socially, when women are included in decision-making processes, communities become more resilient, inclusive, and capable of preserving both cultural identity and sustainable development. Therefore, empowering Indigenous women through education is not only a matter of rights but a foundational step toward long-term social and educational sustainability for their communities. Prominently, collaborative efforts to empower indigenous people, protect their rights, and involve them in decision-making processes are essential in light of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Therefore, this article will explore the gender equality aspects in achieving educational and social sustainability in the indigenous communities.

Indigenous People of Malaysia

Malaysia is home to a rich diversity of indigenous peoples, each with distinct languages, cultures, spiritual beliefs, and traditions. These communities are broadly referred to as "Orang Asal", meaning original people in Malay. 0.8% of Peninsular Malaysia's population is made up of the 18 Orang Asli subgroups that are part of the Negrito (Semang), Senoi, and Aboriginal-Malay groupings. Table 1 shows the three primary tribes of Orang Asli are the Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malays (Masron, Masami, and Ismail, 2017).

Table 1: Ethnic Divisions of Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia

Group	Region
Negrito (Semang)	Northern Peninsular Malaysia
Senoi	Central highlands
Proto-Malay (Aboriginal Malay)	Southern Peninsular Malaysia

The earliest Orang Asli tribes to settle on the peninsula were their forefathers more than 4,000 years ago. They have since adopted a hunter-gatherer and modest farming way of life. The Orang Asli are the custodians of some of Malaysia's richest cultural and ecological knowledge. Ensuring their rights, dignity, education, and participation is essential for a just and sustainable Malaysia. Today, according to the 2020 survey, Malaysia's Indigenous Peoples were thought to make up about 11% of the country's 32.4 million inhabitants. In 2020, there were 206,777 Orang Asli in Malaysia. Orang Asli women, in particular, have been vocal in their advocacy for greater representation of their identity and presence in Malaysian society. They encounter a variety of challenges in their battle for rights, many of which are linked to their identity as Indigenous women and people. In order to achieve true social justice and empowerment, it is imperative that gender equality and feminism within Orang Asli be addressed. It is crucial to acknowledge that Indigenous women in this community frequently encounter a variety of obstacles and prejudice, such as limited access to economic opportunities, healthcare, and educational opportunities (Dong et al., 2022).

Methods

The two main indigenous tribes in Malaysia that are the subject of this case study are the Mah Meri and Temiar tribes. This case study employed a qualitative approach. A semi-structured interview was employed to collect the data from the informants of the study. A total of 10 indigenous women from two main tribes participated as the informants of the study. The researchers used a snowball sampling technique to select the informants that were suggested by the Headman (Tok Batin).

Research Site

This case study centred on two research sites in Peninsular Malaysia, where the Mah Meri and Temiar tribes are located. The Mah Meri tribe is situated at Pulau Carrey, Selangor, and the Temiar tribe was located at Kuala Betis, Kelantan. Pulau Carrey is an island in Selangor, Malaysia and it is located to the south of Port Klang and north of Banting town. It is a huge island separated from the Selangor coast by the Langat River. Kuala Betis is an indigenous settlement in the south of the state of Kelantan. It is situated about 30 kilometres from the city of Gua Musang.

Data Collection

In this study, the semi-structured interview was used as the instrument for data collection purposes. The instrument was developed by first determining the research objectives to be investigated in this study as well as the main themes. The set of semi-structured interviews was developed with a

draft of open-ended, non-leading questions that invite rich, detailed responses that were formulated for flexibility. The interview questions were designed with adapted and simple language to fit the local culture and communication style. The interview questions were validated by three experts before the interviews were implemented. Before the data was collected, the researchers asked for ethical approval from the institution and the approval was obtained. In this study, 10 indigenous women were chosen as informants for the interviews. Focusing on two tribes allows the researcher to go deeper into the lived experiences, cultural contexts, and gender dynamics unique to each group. Moreover, the two selected tribes (Mah Meri and Temiar) represent different cultural practices, social structures, and geographic locations of indigenous women in Malaysia. Five women from Mah Meri tribe and five women from Temiar tribe were selected for the interview and they were asked to respond to the interview questions.

Data Analysis

This study explored the qualitative information gathered during the data collection process. The researchers use the qualitative data analysis software, Atlas. ti 8 to manage and organise coded data using the thematic analysis approach. The audio data were transcribed verbatim, and the data in the local language were translated into English after transcription by the researchers. The researchers repeatedly read the transcripts to become immersed and familiar with the content. The initial codes were generated by the software and the codes were then organised into potential themes. Themes were reviewed to ensure they accurately represented the coded data and the overall dataset. Then, each theme was clearly defined, with attention to what aspect of the data it captured. The final stage involved selecting vivid, compelling quotes from participants to illustrate each theme. To validate all the themes, a member checking technique was performed to confirm the findings. To ensure the credibility of thematic analysis, the researchers used Inter-coder reliability to compare coding results, and resolve differences for consistency and reduce subjective bias.

Results and Discussion

The results of the semi-structured interview's qualitative data are shown in this section. The data from the informants were analysed using the thematic analysis method. The results revealed three major themes, which are (1) respect for human rights, (2) involvement in the indigenous community, (3) education accessibility and lifelong learning.

Respect for human rights

Gender equality and indigenous rights are deeply interconnected. Respecting human rights is fundamental to peace, development, and justice. For indigenous communities, especially women and marginalised groups, ensuring these rights is essential for achieving social inclusion, cultural survival, and sustainable development. According to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which acknowledges that Indigenous Peoples have the right to be free from any kind of discrimination, in the exercise of their rights, the right to self-determination is fundamental to the international human rights framework (Wilkes et al., 2025). Through the thematic analysis, respect for human rights emerged as the first theme and an initial support in the journey toward gender equality. It highlighted how systemic exclusion, lack of protection, and cultural removal undermine indigenous women's rights, ultimately hindering their social sustainability. Without elevating people who are frequently silenced, social sustainability cannot be accomplished. The majority of participants appeared to receive equitable treatment in their communities based on this emerging theme. From the analysis, Participant 1 from Mah Meri and Temiar tribes narrated as follows:

“Women and men were treated very fairly...I can deliver my speech and share my opinions freely ”. (Participant 1, Mah Meri tribe)

“We were treated the same in my village and we can also express ourselves openly”. (Participant 1, Temiar tribe)

Men and women were treated equally in their tribes, according to both participants and they had no trouble voicing their speech in communities. The UNDRIP stated that a roadmap for human rights policy towards Indigenous peoples should be implemented, but it does not create any new rights for them that are not previously granted by other international human rights instruments (Stavenhagen 2009). Based on regional context, women from the Jahai tribe who were researched by Karim et al. (2024) agreed that they were treated equally and had the freedom to voice their opinions and further their education. This proved that human rights are respected by their indigenous communities. Therefore, promoting gender equality among indigenous women by respecting their human rights is essential to creating inclusive, resilient, and socially sustainable societies in Malaysia.

Involvement in the indigenous community

Indigenous women play a vital role in sustaining their communities. However, their involvement in formal leadership and decision-making processes remains constrained by gender norms and traditional power hierarchies. Promoting gender equality within indigenous communities not only empowers women but also strengthens the community's resilience, sustainability, and cohesion. Ensuring that indigenous women are actively engaged in education and cultural preservation is essential for achieving inclusive development and social justice. Involvement in Indigenous communities emerged as the second theme from the analysis, highlighting the crucial but frequently overlooked role that women play in maintaining cultural practices and enhancing the well-being of communities. Making a contribution to one's community is crucial for both personal growth and the community's general health. People can directly enhance their surroundings, foster social interactions, and feel a feeling of belonging because contributions can be made in any situation. It is possible that the social and personal traits that lead to contribution can be learnt and honed in a variety of developmental settings (Deal et al., 2025). Indigenous women play a key role in transmitting traditional knowledge and identity to future generations. In terms of social sustainability, when women help lead, communities benefit from diverse knowledge, balance, and resilience. In terms of cultural survival, active participation boosts women's self-esteem, status, and ability to make decisions, which will strengthen indigenous women in their communities. Participants 1 from the Temiar tribe and Participants 2 and 3 from the Mah Meri tribe provided insightful replies about their engagement in indigenous society.

“...in the community, the task of women to help people who are sick in the village ”. (Participant 2, Mah Meri tribe)

“...while in the community, women have to help the community ...for instance, during any events, we help each other... ”. (Participant 3, Mah Meri tribe)

“...we do Sewang dance in events with others ...(Participant 1, Temiar tribe)

However, 1 participant highlighted that she did not contribute anything for her community.

“...in my community I do not have any task...”(Participant 5, Temiar tribe)

This theme focused on the extent and type of indigenous women's involvement in local events and cultural practices like 'Sewang', which is their cultural dance.

The way women are included, respected, and empowered in their indigenous cultures is reflected in this theme. Language, healing, storytelling, and rituals are all preserved by women in indigenous societies. Thus, Indigenous women are essential in transmitting traditional knowledge and identity to the next generation, which greatly enhances sustainability.

Education accessibility and lifelong learning

Despite international frameworks supporting the right to education for all, indigenous communities, including the Orang Asli in Malaysia, face persistent barriers to accessing quality, culturally relevant education. Geographic isolation, poverty, and linguistic and cultural marginalisation contribute to lower enrolment and completion rates, particularly among girls. Although many indigenous peoples still experience marginalisation, acute poverty, and human rights violations, they are essential to maintaining the biological and cultural diversity of the world. Lifelong learning initiatives such as adult literacy programs and community-based vocational training are critical for empowering indigenous women, promoting gender equality, and supporting sustainable community development. The idea of lifelong experiential learning, which aims to create the critical attitudes, understandings, and abilities necessary to exhibit continual effective practice, demonstrates the necessity of a trans-educational approach to Indigenous intercultural potential development (Saunders et al. 2024). Inclusive education policies that recognise and integrate indigenous knowledge, languages, and perspectives are essential for achieving SDG 4 and fostering social justice. Education is a human right and a pathway to gender equality. This final theme examines how gender equality and the sustainability of education in Indigenous communities are supported by inclusive, ongoing, and equitable access to education. This theme is crucial because it provides indigenous women with knowledge, voice, skills, and opportunities to participate in culture. With regards to gender equality as an attribute to education sustainability, equal access allows women to pursue knowledge, careers, and leadership. Moreover, when girls stay in school and succeed, they will engage in meaningful learning that reflects their culture and needs, and it will strengthen lifelong learning in the indigenous community. Human and interspecies knowledge transfer and connectedness are crucial to the work of Indigenous cultural-ecological restoration through intergenerational and lifelong learning (Williams, 2024). Based on this emerging topic, Mah Meri tribe members, Participant 1 and Participant 3 stated that the government helped them by providing them with educational opportunities in schools and

by sending them abroad to acquire experience and knowledge for lifelong learning.

“...the government provided various education opportunities ...enhance Mah Meri handicrafts and invite tourists to come here for a cultural visit so it will bring education to us” (Participant 1, Mah Meri tribe)

“...the government allowed us to go to school ...and they send the women to overseas for handicrafts exhibitions (Participant 3, Mah Meri tribe)

Participant 3 and Participant 5 stressed that they can go to school for education.

“...we can go to school ...” (Participant 3, Temiar tribe)

“...the government support us to go to school ...” (Participant 5, Temiar tribe)

The theme of education accessibility draws attention to the ongoing disparities that Malaysian indigenous women face in obtaining high-quality, culturally relevant education. Addressing these barriers is key not only to achieving gender equality but also to ensuring education systems are sustainable, inclusive, and representative of indigenous voices and values.

Conclusions

This case study aims to explore the gender equality aspects in achieving educational and social sustainability in the indigenous communities. In conclusion, cultivating gender equality among indigenous women in Malaysia is not only a matter of justice but a foundation for achieving lasting educational and social sustainability. Promoting gender equality is key to enhancing their social participation, preserving Indigenous identity and cultural practices, reducing poverty and dependence and creating intergenerational benefits. The results of the study have highlighted critical themes such as respect for human rights, involvement in indigenous communities and education accessibility and lifelong learning. A multidimensional strategy that upholds cultural identity, eliminates structural obstacles, and encourages inclusive, gender-responsive policies is needed to address these issues. Malaysia can create communities that are more resilient, equitable, and sustainable by making sure indigenous women are empowered through education and acknowledged as important change agents. However,

there will be real progress only if indigenous women are empowered and encouraged to take the initiative. Hence, achieving sustainability requires more than just policy reform; it demands inclusive approaches that honour indigenous knowledge, support gender equity, and remove structural barriers. Empowered indigenous women are not only more likely to access better living and health outcomes, but they also play a crucial role in preserving indigenous languages, traditions, and ecological knowledge. This investment therefore yields multigenerational benefits, advancing both gender equality and indigenous community well-being in alignment with global development goals such as SDG 4 and SDG 5.

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Data Availability: All data are included in the content of the paper.

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